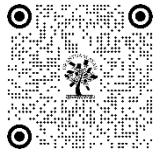


EXAMINING 'SITA' THROUGH THE ARTISTIC KALEIDOSCOPE OF RAJA RAVI VARMA AS AN EXPRESSION OF GENDER STEREOTYPE

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ABSTRACT

The word myth originated from the Greek word 'mythos' meaning story or tale. Etymologically, the word cues the oral tradition which introduces the socio-cultural heritage of the country. Myth and legends are popular and widely incorporated themes in Indian art and tradition. Colonial Indian artist, Raja Ravi Varma's paintings are based on the mythological instances mentioned in the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata. His paintings of God and Goddess are significant in popularising Hindu mythology among the people irrespective of caste and class. Fused with Western art techniques and Indian sensibilities the works of Raja Ravi Varma reflect the social-cultural norms of the time. Thus, through the select works of Varma based on *Ramayana*, this work studies how Sita is portrayed in connection with gender norms.

Keywords: Myth, Gender, Idealisation of Women, Patriarchy, Culture, etc

1. INTRODUCTION

Analysis of Indian art and cultural traditions shows the significance of myth and legends in shaping Indian identity. 'Myth' is a word rooted in Greek 'mythos' indicating tales or stories. The mythologies are the tales based on Gods, Goddesses, or supernatural beings, which usually end with a moral message. Literary theorist Roland Gerard Barthes in his book *Mythology* defines myth as a narrative that comments on social issues, power structures, or cultural values, often using allegory or symbolism (Lavers, n.d.). As Barthes explains 'myth' beholds the twin purpose, firstly they help in unleashing the socio-cultural heritage of a country in the form of oral tradition and it also has a prominent role in instilling discipline and morale in the younger minds. From the traditional to the modern era, the infusion of myths and legends into art forms is very common, and the continuing adaptation of these tales indicates their relevancy. The

integration of myths into movies, theatre performances, photographs, and paintings is considered a medium to reflect the cultural identity of the nation. India during the period of colonialism was chaotic resulting in Western dominance and the suppression of native identity. The immediate need to regain the suppressed Indian identity resulted in the consolidation of myth and legends into different art forms like paintings. Raja Ravi Varma, who is known as the father of modern Indian art was the pioneering figure in this attempt. Born into a scholarly family, Varma was deeply influenced by ancient literature and Hindu mythology. This affinity inspired Varma to paint forlorn narratives from the epics by merging them with Western art techniques.

Raja Ravi Varma was also recognized for his aesthetic and sensual depiction of women, his female characters are divine and perfect reflecting beauty and attractiveness. Beyond this, a closer analysis of Varma's paintings of women with male characters marks a thorough demarcation allied to the conventional gender boundaries. Focusing on the paintings based on the *Ramayana* this study attempts to analyse how women, particularly, Sita are conceived compared to other male characters like Rama, Lakshmana, Hanuman, and Ravana.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The article titled *A Study of Retellings in Indian Mythology with Special Reference to Sita, A Book by Devadutt Pattanaik*, is a re-interpretation of Sita of *Ramayana* written by Valmiki. Valmiki describes Sita as a perfect housewife, who is very much devoted to her husband. This idealisation of womanhood in later days turned out to be a gender-specific norm of the patriarchal system. Unlike this Pattanaik seeks to divert the perspective of subjugating Sita as a mere housewife and devoted wife to her husband Rama. In this article, the author highlights how Pattanaik's effort succeeded in paving a multi-dimensional view of the great epics and thereby he changed the traditional forms of myth. Unlike Valmiki's Sita, Pattanaik's Sita is strong and humane. Among the many retellings based on *Ramayana*, Pattanaik's Sita is individualistic, free from the restrictions of conventions (Kulkarni, 2020).

When 'Ramarajya' is treated as misogynist or patriarchal, the author explores the concept called 'Sitarajya' through the article *Narrative, Norms, and Notion: Exploring the Prospect of 'Sitarajya' through Devadutt Pattanaik's Sita: An Illustrative Retelling of the Ramayana*. This exploratory analysis attempts to examine the potential of 'Sitarajya' free of patriarchal norms and traditions, this aims to prove that men and women are equal, and also women are capable of administration (Tyagi & Anand, 2024).

Locating Sita or the other characters from *Ramayana* as the protagonist is the common approach to studying *Ramayana* in the modern academic realm, apart from this notion, the article *Re-reading Ramayana in the 21st Century: A Critical Analysis of Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's Interpretation of Ramayana in the Forest of Enchantments* unfolds an emancipatory voyage to the journey of Sita, as she observes and realises the cruelty and injustices that are happening to women in a patriarchal setup (Chowdhury, 2024).

An article on *Ramayana* discusses the minor women characters of the epic and the messages they convey. The article analyses the Vedic era, in particular, to point out the distinctions that have happened so far regarding gender perceptions. Women of the Vedic era were treated as Independent and strong. The author discusses that there were efforts made to camouflage the patriarchal supremacy (Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities, 2024)

These works deconstruct the original text by displacing Rama as the protagonist. Every instance mentioned in the original text is re-read from the viewpoint of Sita. The authors in the article *Narrative, Norms, and Notion: Exploring the Prospect of 'Sitarajya' through Devadutt Pattanaik's Sita: An Illustrative Retelling of the Ramayana* even try reimagining *Ramarajya* with 'Sitarajya'. The work is particular in depicting Sita's capability as an authority. The work subverts the gender-specific hierarchy by placing Sita as the central figure. These articles are based on the original text written by Valmiki.

Ramayana and *Mahabharata* are great sources of influence for many Indian art forms like dance, theatre performances, sculpture, and paintings. The sculptures around the temples and historical monuments are based on the epics including *Ramayana* and there are paintings like the miniature paintings of India. Though the article *Study of Ramayana through Indian Miniature Paintings* strives to study how the instances from *Ramayana* are utilised and portrayed in the miniature schools of paintings (Sharma et al., n.d.).

The Ramayana is influential to every art form of India, most of the retellings of *the Ramayana* are based on the textual narratives and very few could be traced on the visual narrative format; painting. India is rich in art and traditions, the

study *Study of Ramayana through Indian Miniature Paintings* is specific about analysing how *Ramayana* is used as the central theme in ancient paintings. They analyse about the adaptation of myth into painting and not many attempts have been made to discuss how gender stereotypes are asserted through art, especially paintings. Hence, this study ventures to learn how art was used as a tool to propagate dogmas; specifically stereotypes based on gender..

The reviews of literary articles are primarily based on the Indian epic *Ramayana*, The work attributed to the sage Valmiki is a poetic narrative about the journey of Lord Rama. The work unfolds the multitudes of instances and messages that serve as a significant part of Indian culture. Along with Rama, characters like Sita and Lakshmana also hold an important position in the work as they revolve around the protagonist Rama. Sita in the work is presented as an ideal Indian woman, who is docile, calm, and devoted to her husband and the values in which she was raised. Many rereadings and interpretations have been made based on the text redirecting the original story. Most of the readings are based on Sita, as she is placed as a subtle character. Though the works are based on *Ramayana*, there are no attempts seen to focus on how Sita is placed in the paintings, specifically Raja Ravi Varma's paintings.

3. AN OVERVIEW OF VARMA'S PORTRAYALS OF RAMAYANA

The paintings chosen for the study are works based on *Ramayana*, which is a narrative about the journey of Lord Rama. Raja Ravi Varma has painted different instances from the text like *Jatayu Vadha*, *Rama Breaking the Bow*, *Vanvasi Ram*, etc. Among the varied paintings based on this epic, the study focuses particularly on the depiction of Sita. According to the mythology, Sita is the daughter of King Janaka and the wife of Rama, the prince of Ayodhya. According to various Hindu mythology-based texts, Sita is considered the ideal woman. In the text entitled *My India, The India Eternal*, the author describes Sita, Savitri, and Damayanti as the perfect representation of womanhood. The text elaborates that in India, women are mothers or the physical manifestation of god, who are supposed to be marvelous, all suffering and ever forgiving (Vivekananda, 1993). Even though this idealization of womanhood has changed, the thought has a deeper impact on the lives and culture of India, both positive and negative. The concept was influential in the creation of various literary and visual art forms encompassing the lives and essence of womanhood. Raja Ravi Varma's paintings are based on women, in general, and are aesthetic and critical in the placement of gender identity. The paintings *Ram*, *Lakshmana & Sita Crossing the Sarayu*, *Sita Taken by Goddess Earth*, *Vanvasi Ram*, *Jatayu Vadha*, and *Sita in Ashoka Grove* posit the question of the gender identity of Sita. Sita in *Ramayana* is more than Rama's wife, she is called the warrior princess of Mithila. Sita, being praised for her dedication towards her husband and obedience to the circumstances, undergoes several emotional fluxes proving her bravery and strong-mindedness. In paralleling Ravi Varma's paintings about Sita, she was placed as a subtle character dependent on the male subjects unlike what is meant to be. Therefore, this paper strives to understand how her identity is interpreted by Varma in the paintings.

4. METHODOLOGY

The ekphrasis analysis of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings on Sita endeavors to review how she is placed in the visual narratives in comparison with the textual narratives based on the mythological figure Sita; where 'ekphrasis' is a literary technique of describing visual art in detail to give the reader a better understanding of the topic meant to be explored. By paralleling the textual and visual depiction of the scenes chosen, the qualitative study has attempted to read the influence of culture and conventional gender-based norms in the conception of Sita by the artist, Raja Ravi Varma; thereby this enables to trace the true identity of Sita and how the artist portrayed her. Therefore the study delves into the question of gender stereotyping through the mythological depiction of Sita.

5. FROM TEXT TO SIGHT: VISUAL SPECIFICATIONS OF VARMA'S SITA

Normalisation and idealisation of gender-based stereotypes in literature and other art forms have been a serious concern for a very long time in India. The paintings of Raja Ravi Varma have also adhered to the conventional idea of gender placement, where male characters are portrayed as heroic and individual and women as fragile and calm. The paintings *Vanvasi Ram*, *Jatayu Vadha*, *Sita in Ashoka Grove*, *Ram*, *Sita*, and *Lakshmana Crossing the Sarayu* and *Sita Taken by Goddess Earth* are the paintings selected for the analysis, which also depict Sita. The painting *Sita in Ashoka Grove* (1894) is about the veiling Sita whom Ravana abducts. The painting depicts Sita sitting beneath the Ashoka tree surrounded by the native women of Lanka. She is seated, reclining on the tree beside her as if she pangs over the

separation. The colour palette used for this painting is dark and polychromatic to suggest the severity and diversity of the scene. The enduring emotion in the picture is sorrow and loneliness.

Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana Crossing Sarayu River, the 1898 illustration taken from the *Ramayana*. The painting represents Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana's departure from Ayodhya, marking the beginning of their fourteen years of exile in the forest. The artist has incorporated a polychromatic technique in the paintings, mostly based on the dark shades. Ram and Lakshmana are presented as *sadhus*. In contrast, Sita is dressed in a dark-shaded saree, which combines red and blue, indicating Sita's belongingness. In the picture, Sita is leaning on Rama's shoulder for consolation and support, which symbolizes dependency on her husband. Varma portrayed the scene amidst them crossing the river Sarayu, voyaging from the native to the forest, which means the transition that they are about to experience. Compared with the other characters in the scene, Sita is more dramatic and attached.

The other painting is titled *Sita Taken by Goddess Earth*, also known as *Sita Bhumi Pravesh*, this is an oil painting believed to have been published in the 1880s. The painting is a description of Goddess Earth coming to save Sita from the questioning of Rama regarding the chastity of Sita. The background of the painting is the palace which is crowded by sages and other people. Rama is placed on the throne to denote his dominance as a ruler, while Sita is supported by the Goddess Earth, denoting maternal affection. In the dark polychromatic undertone, Varma was able to paint the essence and assert how chastity and fidelity are valued in Indian culture. The abiding emotions in the image are rage and helplessness of Sita being speculated by her husband. The rereading of the painting by Raja Ravi Varma also hints at the moment where a woman is supported by another woman.

Vanvasi Ram is a 1910 portrait of Ram, Sita, and Lakshmana during their period of exile. This painting can be treated as a sequel to *Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana Crossing the Sarayu* because the latter describes the journey of Rama and Sita along with Lakshmana to the forest where they spend their exile, while the painting *Vanvasi Ram* gives a description of the life of the three, amidst of thick forest. In the painting, Ram and Lakshmana are portrayed in simple costumes resembling that of 'sadhus' and Sita is pictured in a red saree. The posture of Rama and Lakshmana are dominant and authoritative but Sita is placed as reclining towards Ram's shoulders, which is also similar to the posture in the painting *Rama, Sita and Lakshmana Crossing the Sarayu*. The submissiveness illustrated in the painting idealises the Indian idea of a perfect woman. The artist adopted a polychromatic mechanism to ensure the demarcation of the characters based on gender. The painting *Jatayu Vadha* was published in 1906 as an oil painting by Raja Ravi Varma. The depiction is the fight between Ravana and Jatayu, when he tries to rescue Sita from the antagonist Ravana. The painting is about Ravana chopping off Jatayu's wing, while Sita is portrayed as covering her eyes from the inhuman activity that happened in front of her. Sita despairingly turns away from the cruel act of Ravana, the helplessness of her in the hands of another man is mentioned in the painting by Raja Ravi Varma. Sita is dominated by the masculine figure in the portrait. The colour palette chosen by the artist is prismatic to suggest the diversity in the gender role.

The paintings described are instances selected from the Indian epic *Ramayana*, deviate from the essence of the work as an epic by merging it with the gender-based value system that was prevalent during Raja Ravi Varma's period. In an article, the author defines myth as one of the most effective in conveying powerful messages to the readers and the audiences which can be influential to the development of their personality (Kulkarni, 2020). Ravi Varma also adopted the same way to substantiate the prevalent value system of the time by merging it with mythology and painting. Raja Ravi Varma's paintings are subjected to various literary theories including hegemony, gender studies, cultural studies, etc. The paintings selected for the analysis are inclined towards cultural studies and how gender is perceived according to Indian culture. Analysis of the Indian notion of gender roles asserts the impact of hegemony among the 'other' or women. In the textbook *Introduction to Cultural Studies*, the author defines Cultural studies as a powerful tool to study, reread, and interpret one's own culture critically by eliminating the differences between high and low culture and perceiving it together in order to get a proper understanding about the culture (Nayar). This study based on Raja Ravi Varma's select works taken from *Ramayana* attempts to view how Sita is represented through the paintings as an icon of gender stereotypes.

6. PARALLELING SITA'S DEPICTION IN RAMAYANA AND VARMA'S PAINTINGS

Western art technicalities have greatly influenced the modern paintings of India, the paintings chosen for the study are examples of such paintings which are an amalgamation of Indian sensibilities and Western techniques. The paintings *Vanvasi Ram*, *Jatayu Vadha*, *Sita in Ashoka Grove*, *Ram, Sita, and Lakshmana Crossing the Sarayu* and *Sita Taken by Goddess*

Earth narrate various episodes from Ramayana, particularly discuss the struggles and mishaps that happened during their period of exile. Most paintings based on this aspect showcase Sita as a victim, often dominated by men. In the paintings *Vanvasi Ram* and *Sita and Lakshmana Crossing the Sarayu*, Sita is placed in the same posture and attire to validate Sita's subjugation towards her husband Rama. This painting asserts the conventional gender role prevalent during the period.

The painting *Sita Taken by Goddess Earth* showcases the character traits and the moral values that Indian women are supposed to uphold in their lives, i.e. chastity and patience. Sita in the painting is presented differently compared to the other paintings of her, elaborating the seriousness of the situation. The expression that is foreshadowing in the painting is not calmness but rage and helplessness, which is novel to the feminine trait, because in India women are considered self-suffering, calm, and self-effacing mothers (Vivekananda, 1993). When Rama is surrounded by many people, Sita is only supported by Goddess Earth, this is another implication of the gender role, considering men as authoritative. The throne, the posture, and the background of the paintings are the symbols denotative to this aspect. The painting was later recreated into the fabric with a dozen fine natural colours, the painting gained much acclaim as it is the first of the Recreations of Ravi Varma's paintings (*Ramayana Painting: How Raja Ravi Varma's Ramayana Painting Was Transposed on Jamdani over Two Years | Vogue India*, n.d.). Along with recreation, the work also postulates the forlorn myth and the cultural past of India. This suggests the relevancy of the painter and the paintings.

Like the other paintings from *Ramayana*, the painting *Sita in the Ashoka Grove* illustrates Sita sitting amidst the native women of Lanka. The painters opted to distinguish Sita and other women through the choice of different colour schemes and physiognomy. In the painting, unlike the other paintings based on Sita, no male characters are painted but the patriarchal influence is evident in this painting also. The wailing Sita and the clueless women around are implications of male dominance. Considering the original story, Ravana is the elusive yet authoritative male representation in the painting. Sita in the painting is waiting for Rama to save her from the agony. This awaiting also asserts the dependency of woman to the men according to traditional belief system.

Jatayu Vadha, an adaptation from Ramayana is yet another representation of Sita in a different emotional setting. The female character of the painting is portrayed as attractive in terms of the physiognomy and the subtle posture given to her. The dominant figure in the painting is Ravana, though he is the villain in the epic, this specific image removes such distinctions and embraces the gender-based hierarchy. According to which Ravana is the dominant or the subject, and Sita is presented as fragile and subordinate to authority. The period during which Varma was established as an artist was filled with tensions and identity crisis, but his paintings were greatly influenced by Western academic realism. *Jatayu Vadha* is an example for the compilation of Indian elements and Western techniques.

Sita is distressed at Jatayu's slaying whereas Jatayu is fighting valiantly with Ravana and on the other side Ravana's posture, expressions, and body language are filled with annoyance, arrogance, and confidence. Such emphasis on facial expressions was the Western idiom and was not seen in Indian paintings earlier (Rathore, 2016).

When artists like K.Venkatappa, painted instances from *Ramayana* in an exaggerated manner by giving Ravana multiple heads and hands in the depiction of the scene where Ravana fights with Jatayu, Ravi Varma ornamented the painting in a more naturalistic and realistic way, which made it more relatable than the latter. Compared to Ravi Varma's paintings based on the scene, Venkatappa's paintings are more superficial. He painted the scene in the sky while Ravana was abducting Sita in a chariot (Sistla, 2022). This summarises the difference between the two artists because Ravi Varma's paintings aimed at convincing the portrait and the meaning lying beneath the visual representation also.

The paintings of Raja Ravi Varma based on mythology were aesthetic, realistic, and detailed. He paid attention not only to the Indian aesthetic detailing but also to the physiognomy, costumes, ornaments, and the background adherent to the myth (Cooksey, 2016). Raja Ravi Varma's paintings are examples of Academic Realism which is a Western concept of representing objects in a real or naturalistic way rather than presenting them as an idea or symbol. The paintings based on *Ramayana* are no different from this fact, as he had chosen the physiognomic features, background, and details contributing to the scene very carefully.

The postures of the characters and the color palette are other aspects Varma chooses to depict the dominant and subordinate. In the paintings *Vanvasi Ram*, *Jatayu Vadha* and *Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana Crossing the River Sarayu*, Sita is in a reclining posture towards the male characters, this is an implication of the dependency of Sita. During the 18th and 19th centuries, art was a strong medium for propagating ideas and it served a didactic purpose also. When Abanindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, and other artists of the era approached art as a medium to regain the forlorn cultural /national identity. Ravi Varma used art as a tool to preach the values of India through mythological depiction. The paintings based

on the *Ramayana* Series are exemplifications of marital responsibility, the role of men and women, social duty, etc. Though the scenes depicted are diverse, the paintings chosen hold uniformity in terms of artistic positioning. The paintings *Vanvasi Ram*, *Jatayu Vadha* and *Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana Crossing the River Sarayu*, are polychromatic in general, as the artist deliberately attempted to paint Sita to look apart from the other characters through the colour of her clothes and then through the bodily and emotional depiction. The analysis therefore points out that even when Raja Ravi Varma's paintings are a combination of realistic and religious fervor; through Sita, the artist succeeded in instilling the conventional gender norms of considering men authoritative and women, followers of men. Through the depiction of Sita and instances from *Ramayana*, the artist was also able to use art to teach the cultural heritage which is influential on society.

Many rereadings have been attempted based on the *Ramayana* highlighting the 'other' characters like Sita and Subhadra. The most popular among them are the readings of Devdutt Patnaik and the reinterpretations made by Amish Tripathi. Patnaik provided a distinct perspective of *Ramayana* by allocating Sita as the main character. His Sita was human and humane, while Amish Tripathi gave a bold and strong outlook, to reinstate the 'warrior princess' outlook to Sita. However, according to the original version of *Ramayana*, Sita is a stereotypical character, representing a perfect Indian wife. She is a passive, submissive, docile, and self-sacrificing woman, who is devoted to her husband. She is a follower of what Rama commands (Kulkarni, 2020). Ravi Varma's paintings are not different from the Sita of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Varma's Sita is also passive and self-suffering and an unquestioning follower of her husband. Thus this exemplifies the fact that Raja Ravi Varma's Sita is a visual expression of gender norms that existed in India.

In an article, published in *The Guardian*, the author narrates about the serialisation of the *Ramayana* on the national television of India, during the 1980s (Nagra, 2013). There were many attempts made in different mediums to propagate the cultural past of India. Serialisation, Theatre performances, and *Amarchitrakadha* are the other mediums used for popularising mythology. In this context, Raja Ravi Varma's paintings are one of the pioneering mediums used for the purpose. Other than this aspect, In the article, *Why People Need Epics: Terming and Learning from the Divine Yet Human*, the authors conclude that compared to the West, epics, and mythology are important as they enshrine the concept called *dharma* or righteousness (*Why People Need Epics*, n.d.). Every art based on mythology, therefore, was a medium to disseminate the value system advocated by Indian culture and traditions like the *purushartha*. Thus, Ravi Varma's paintings based on *Ramayana* were particular in promoting gender-based conventions, which demands authority and independence for men and subjugation as well as devotion for women.

7. CONCLUSION

The paintings of Raja Ravi Varma are revolutionary in India, as he deviated from the conventional form and integrated with modern art techniques to make the work more realistic and aesthetic. This undertaking resulted in the popularity and admiration for Hindu mythology and ancient literature; the *Ramayana* series are example. The artist is credited for the innumerable paintings he did, including both dated and undated, acknowledged and unacknowledged. Among the many mythology-based paintings, Varma's paintings inspired by *Ramayana* are graceful and widely appreciated for how it is conceptualised. From the closer analysis of the paintings, it is understood that Varma's *Ramayana*-based paintings are not just the replication of the scenes written but are an aesthetic strive to postulate the traditional gender roles according to Indian culture. The technical aspects inclusive of the choice of the palette, phsygnomy, exteriors, gestures, and emotions he preferred are the result of a deliberate and careful attempt to make the objective of the art complete. Like the rereadings of Devdutt Patnaik and Amish Tripathi, Ravi Varma's paintings of Sita are not only the visual re-presentation of the original Sita, but the paintings simply claim the conventions of treating and viewing women through the gender-specific stereotypes, that are relevant during the period.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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